

Paul Wharton
Green Party Candidate
for Sevenoaks



Is our country as divided as the Brexit debate made it appear?

These are difficult times. Just when we need to be united in tackling problems such as poverty, crumbling public services and – above all – the climate crisis, the country is tearing itself apart over Brexit.

Families, friends, political parties: everyone has been put under enormous strain by the 2016 referendum and its aftermath. Nor is there an end in sight. A withdrawal treaty is only the first step towards a new relationship with our European neighbours. The wrangling will continue for years to come.

The answer to the question, then, is Yes. Is it possible to heal these divisions? Not in the short term, perhaps. But I think there are a few points on which Leavers and Remainers might now agree.

One would surely be the staggering incompetence of the Conservative government. David Cameron promised an in-out referendum in the belief that it would never happen, and then assumed that the Brexiters would lose. He had to resign. His successor signed a deal with the EU that was repeatedly rejected by huge majorities in the Commons.

The present Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement was approved by most MPs, but then shelved. Boris Johnson was afraid of what might happen to the bill if it was properly scrutinised.

Throughout this painful process the Conservatives have put the interests of their party above those of the country. And they have failed even in this respect, as large numbers of Tory MPs have refused to endorse the government's approach.

Another point of agreement between the two camps might be about the difficulty and complexity of leaving the European Union. Since 1973 Britain has developed its economy, security systems and so on as a full member, and of course will remain geographically close to the EU – our largest trading partner.

Brexit has therefore been compared to unscrambling eggs. It was sold to us three and a half years ago as something easy and painless, but both sides of the argument can now see how wrong that idea was.